

## **The Employer's Responsibility to Maintain a Safe and Healthful Work Environment: An Historical Review of Societal Expectations and Industrial Practices**

**John L. Henshaw · Shannon H. Gaffney ·  
Amy K. Madl · Dennis J. Paustenbach**

**Abstract** As early as 1200 A.D., it has been common English law practice for a master to protect his/her servant. Throughout time, this practice has been tested and has evolved into our modern day obligation of the employer to assure the health and safety of his or her employees. This historical analysis reviews specific events that influenced the expectation that employers are responsible for workplace safety and health beginning before the Industrial Revolution and leading up to and through the implementation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in the United States. This review is divided into three time periods covering the era of industrialization and early recognition of occupational hazards (late 1800s–1949), the era of voluntary industrial standards and controls (1950–1969), and the modern era of federal regulation (1970–present). Also outlined are the several approaches the law has taken to addressing employer responsibility shifting from fault-based injury compensation to disease-specific prevention strategies, and then to a no-fault workmen's compensation system, and finally to a mandatory minimum-requirement national legislation. Furthermore, the growth of the occupational safety and health profession is addressed as these systems acted as drivers to promote employer responsibility, and many employers hired health and safety professionals to ensure that they were upholding their responsibility to their employees.

**Key words** industrial hygiene · safety · occupational health